



Stephens, B. (2016). 'Chateaubriand ou rien, Hugo et tout': contemplating the poet's posterity. *Dix-Neuf*, 20(3-4), 229-240.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14787318.2016.1263429>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1080/14787318.2016.1263429](https://doi.org/10.1080/14787318.2016.1263429)

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INTRODUCTION

Chateaubriand ou rien, Hugo et tout:

Contemplating the Poet's Posterity

Bradley Stephens

Abstract: Victor Hugo's vow as a teenager to become Chateaubriand ultimately surpassed even this audacious ambition. Today, Hugo casts an inescapable shadow across contemporary culture as nineteenth-century France's most iconic writer, as recent political, pedagogical, and popular discussions indicate. This article explores some of these examples so as to confirm Hugo's redoubtable cultural capital before asking: what did it actually mean in Hugo's eyes to equal his childhood idol's standing? By returning to Hugo's own understanding of what it meant to become a 'great man', the clichés of patriarchal authority that so often surround his oeuvre can be contested in order to allow for a more probing understanding of both his work and his enduring influence. A closing overview of this special issue of *Dix-Neuf* situates the journal's diverse contributions along this critical line of thinking as an introduction to the scholarship that Hugo's work increasingly encourages in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Victor Hugo, Chateaubriand, posterity, patriarchy, biography, reception, memorialisation, popular culture, French national education.

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It has been 200 years since a teen-aged Victor Hugo declared, ‘Je veux être Chateaubriand ou rien’ [I want to be Chateaubrian or nothing], as recorded by his wife Adèle in her biographical portrait of her husband (1985: 297).¹ Given that Hugo’s name today returns over 80 million hits on Google compared with under 10 million for Chateaubriand – and that a refined search to distinguish between Chateaubriand the steak and Chateaubriand the writer leaves the latter with fewer than 200,000 hits – this adolescent avowal may be one of the infrequent times when Hugo’s capacity for prophetic vision was not fully primed. Hugo would indeed come to fashion an unprecedented renown for a man of letters in France, possessing an unwavering faith in the principles of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité* that he believed would shape the post-Revolutionary world.

Hugo’s energetic commitment to those values in both his extensive life and his vast body of work made him an indomitable figure of the nineteenth century, bringing him early fame, the martyrdom of exile, and global adulation. This was a century that increasingly monumentalized its heroes in what Michael Garval has aptly termed ‘a dream of stone’, but Hugo’s death in 1885 almost uncannily coincided with ‘a broader shift from the period’s heroic, monolithic conception of literary glory toward the beginnings of modern mass-media, mass-market celebrity’ (Garval 2004: 33). As Rodin worked on his monument to Hugo in the 1890s and Louis-Ernest Barrias erected his own bronze monument in Paris’ Place Victor-Hugo in 1902, Hugo’s likeness was being reproduced on all manner of commemorative and commercial paraphernalia, such as writing equipment, busts, clothing, dinner plates, and confectionery. The white beard and short, somewhat wild hair that the poet began sporting in the early 1860s would by the time of his death become a trademark image for the Hugo brand. It fuelled an entire industry of Hugolian memorabilia, as was the subject of a major exhibition at the Maison de Victor Hugo in Paris in 2011,² and examples of which can still

easily be found for sale, including collector's medals, stamps, and playing cards. In bookstores and online, the bearded Hugo tends to look out from the cover jackets and title pages of his works. Even early publications, such as Gallimard's standard edition of *Les Orientales* (1829), often appear with Hugo's older features on the cover, in spite of the fact that he was only 27 when he published that volume of poetry.

It is the image of an Olympian elder that is instantly recognizable within – and resoundingly inseparable from – France's national heritage. The French language may belong to Molière, but two recent surveys have confirmed that there is only one writer who can claim dominion over the country's literature. In February 2015, just over 1000 French men and women from a broad range of backgrounds were asked by *Le Magazine littéraire*: 'Parmi les écrivains suivants, lesquels incarnent selon vous le mieux la France, sa culture, sa langue, son génie, tant dans notre pays qu'à l'étranger?' [Out of the following writers, which in your opinion best embody the ideas of France, French culture, the French language, and the nation's creativity, both at home and abroad?] The result was not so much a case of 'Hugo, hélas!', to recall Gide's notorious (if often unquestioned) comment, but 'Hugo, bien sûr!' [Hugo, of course!], with Hugo scoring more than 40% more votes than his closest runners-up, such as Molière, Zola, Voltaire, and Verne (Assouline 2015). The following month, the French daily *Le Figaro* conducted a similar survey with OpinionWay, asking which writers, both living and past, were the nation's favourite. Whereas novelist Marc Levy's victory in today's publishing industry was the subject of much discussion, Hugo's success (once again over Verne and Zola, although this time with Marcel Pagnol also scoring highly) proved far less contentious (Aissaoui 2015).

Later that year, one political gaffe served as a reminder that Hugo's iconic significance remains integral to standards of both French education and *culture générale*. In a speech in Seine-Saint-Denis attacking government policy on 11 May 2015, former President

Nicolas Sarkozy spoke out against proposed reforms to the French middle-school system which he believed would compromise excellence in student learning. Citing names such as Balzac and Maupassant as examples of the strengths offered by traditional topics of study, the current chairman of the UMP also turned to *Quatrevingt-Treize*, ‘ce magnifique livre de Victor Hugo’ (‘this magnificent book by Victor Hugo’; Le Scan politique 2015). His official Twitter account, however, erroneously noted the book’s title as *1793*, much to the amusement of many commentators online. The hashtag ‘#tweetecommesarko’ [#tweetlikeSarko] quickly began trending, with some noting that if the education system was bordering on mediocrity, then Sarkozy and his team were themselves living proof, especially in light of the former president’s notorious attacks on Mme de Lafayette’s *La Princesse de Clèves* in 2006. Embarrassingly, Sarkozy repeated the same mistake in another speech at Rilleux-La-Pape ten days later (Baldit 2015), doing little to silence those who had accused him of philistinism and political expediency.

Sarkozy could perhaps have taken solace in another Twitter row that had erupted the previous summer, in which Hugo’s reputation as one of the French republic’s superlative patriarchs was shown not to be without controversy. Had the furore not so closely centred on how well students in French secondary education were expected to know Hugo, he might even have been able to cite the episode in support of his own thinking. Reaching deep into French culture, it is no surprise that a figure of Hugo’s towering renown touches upon more than a few nerves, but in June 2014 a large number of *lycéens* opened a new chapter in the history of so-called Hugophobia. Hugo’s poem ‘Crépuscule’ from Book II of *Les Contemplations* (1856) had been set as a commentary exercise for that year’s *baccalauréat* examinations. The poet’s communion with the mysteries of nature confounded many candidates, with the third verse in particular causing much outrage due to ‘cette histoire de brin d’herbe qui parle à une tombe’ (‘this story about a blade of grass that talks to a tomb’;

Provost 2014). ‘Au lieu de nous donner [ce brin d’herbe] en sujet t’aurais pu le fumer’ [instead of giving us this grass as a subject, you could have smoked it], protested one student who, like numerous others, had taken to Twitter to vent her impatience, while another declared ‘Putain. Victor Hugo quoi. Connard de Victor Hugo’ [Fuck. Victor Hugo, innit. What an asshole], giving his generation their own spin on ‘Hugo, hélas!’ Some 20,000 Tweets on the subject would appear, in part reflecting much wider protests against the difficulties of the French examining system (Baumard 2014). But this online vitriol also prompted much national pride from less bemused students and equally as vocal older users who leapt to Hugo’s defence. Such responses included a sarcastic screenshot of this ‘vibrant homage’ to Hugo’s artistry, re-tweeted images of a narrow-eyed and clearly unimpressed Hugo, and an exclamation bemoaning that ‘certains pensent que le bac tombe tout cuit du ciel’ [some think that the bac just falls into their lap]. Once again, Hugo’s importance to France’s national self-fashioning was clear.

Notwithstanding the insights into French cultural politics that this year in Hugo’s afterlife affords, and on the 200th anniversary of his famous ‘Chateaubriand ou rien’ comment, it is timely to ask: what did it actually mean to Hugo to attain the standing of his childhood idol? The commonplace explanation offers an oedipal account: Hugo overcomes the same anxiety of influence that would bear down on his would-be successors, combining Napoleonic feats of conquest with Romantic ideas of inspirational talent. Just as he felt that fashionable attempts to mock Chateaubriand’s qualities as a writer only confirmed his merits, so too did he stare down his own detractors, converting parody into positivity and anticipating the idea often attributed to another nineteenth-century showman, P. T. Barnum, that there is no such thing as bad publicity.³ Reassuring his friend Alexandre Dumas *père* that he needed to withstand his critics’ assaults in a letter dated 16 June 1865, Hugo affirmed: ‘Vous êtes la lumière; l’Empire est la nuit; il vous hait, c’est tout simple, il veut vous

éteindre, c'est moins simple. Il y perdra son souffle et sa peine. L'ombre qu'il versera sur vous ajoutera à votre rayonnement' ('You're the light; the Empire is the darkness; they hate you, which is straightforward enough, and they want to extinguish you, which is less straightforward to do. They will lose their breath and will in trying to do so. The shadows they will cast upon you will enhance your luminance'; Schopp 2015: 188). Hugo's characteristic resourcefulness in finding the sublime in the grotesque was also an apparently undefeatable weapon to use against opponents to his ascendancy.

It is therefore unsurprising that clichés of patriarchal authority can easily abound when Hugo's name is cited, sometimes conveyed through the kind of single-minded soundbite that he coined in 1816: when Max Gallo published his two-volume biography of Hugo in 2001, his use of 'Je suis une force qui va!' ('I'm a force in motion!'; from *Hernani*, Act III; 1830) and 'Je serai celui-là!' ('I will be that one'; from 'Ultima verba', the final poem in Book VII of *Les Châtiments*; 1853)⁴ for the titles of each tome succinctly captured Hugo's artistic verve and moral resolve as one of France's 'great men'. This is, after all, the writer who seemingly wrote the book on *L'Art d'être grand-père* (1877), and whose death was marked not only by an extraordinary State funeral but also by the return of the Panthéon to its secular function so as to act as Hugo's last resting place, thereby evicting God Himself from the building. As Pierre Georgel summarised on the centenary of the country's farewell to the man who had become a French equivalent to one of America's founding fathers:

L'attribut le plus constamment prêté à Hugo, à tout propos et de toutes parts, c'est la démesure. Depuis ses premières interventions publiques, toutes les métaphores de l'immensité, de l'énormité, de l'altitude, toutes les figures appropriées de la fable et de l'Histoire, ont été utilisées et ressassées pour rendre compte à la fois de sa personnalité, de la nature de son œuvre et de sa place dans le siècle. 'Un *grand* homme': jamais, peut-être, la formule n'a été à ce point pris à la lettre. (1985: 88)

[The attribute most consistently lent to Hugo, in all respects and from all quarters, is excess. From his first interventions in public life, all the metaphors related to immensity, enormity, altitude, and all the tropes appropriated from

legend and history, have been used and trotted out to realise at once his personality, the nature of his work, and his place in the century. ‘A *great man*’: never perhaps has the moniker been so aptly used.]

However, was the mantle of the lofty father-figure in keeping with Hugo’s own understanding of *grandeur*, and how does that understanding help us interpret his work today?

Clues to an answer lie in taking a yet closer look at the reactions to Hugo surrounding the 2014 *baccalauréat*. Some astute reporters noted that Hugo himself had sometimes criticized the *baccalauréat* for appearing outdated and that he might well have appreciated the outbursts against him (Pudlowski 2014), although such attacks on his part concentrated more upon the pedantry of conventional teaching methods as opposed to the use of classical or canonical material *per se*. This extract from *William Shakespeare* (1864), for example, confirms Hugo’s distrust of conservative approaches to curriculum design that fail to recognize history’s changing patterns of expression, production, and consumption:

Les chefs-d’œuvre recommandés par le manuel au baccalauréat, les compliments en vers ou en prose, les tragédies plafonnant au-dessus de la tête d’un roi quelconque [...] les Arts poétiques qui oublient La Fontaine et pour qui Molière est un peut-être, [...] tout cela, quoique l’enseignement officiel et public en soit saturé et rempli, tout cela est du passé. (1985a: 393-94)

[Masterworks recommended by schoolbooks for the baccalaureate, gushing verse or prose, tragedies crowning the head of some king ... poetic arts which forget La Fontaine and see Molière as only a possible contender ... all of that, even though official instruction and public education are fully saturated by it, all of it belongs in the past.]

The figure bearing the brunt of the *lycéens*’ frustrations that summer may, in all likelihood, have lent a more sympathetic ear to their woes than they could have guessed. Furthermore, while there may be two centuries separating Hugo’s schoolboy scribbles about Chateaubriand from our own celebrity-obsessed culture, it is fair to say that, in an age where reality television and video-sharing platforms online offer the chance of instant acclaim, his

determination to become France's brightest star matches the youthful aspirations of today's digital generation.

What begins to emerge upon such consideration is a more intriguing image of Hugo than the stereotype of a literary legend suggests, and one whose construction is equivalent in critical terms to a light-hearted appropriation of Hugo's patriarchal image from 2003. When the French publisher Hachette wanted to promote its involvement with the Paris-Plage scheme that year using its *Livre de poche* subsidiary, they turned to Hugo. The idea was simple: at a modest price, visitors to the Paris-Plage (still in the singular in this second year of existence) could borrow *Livre de poche* titles from a library that had been set up between the Ponts Marie and Louis-Philippe. Publicists used Nadar's famous 1884 photograph of a pensive Hugo with his arm resting on a stack of books and his head leaning squarely on his hand for a full-page advertisement in the 25 July edition of *Le Monde*, but with one key difference: Hugo was wearing a pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses, with the slogan 'Tous à Paris-Plage' and the *Livre de poche* logo beneath him. The advert visualizes both Hugo's guise as the established luminary from a bygone age and his refusal to stay remotely locked away in the past; he is at once 'ce vieux père Hugo' [this old father, Hugo] that Flaubert also nicknamed 'le Grand Crocodile' (1974-76, II: 379-80), and the mischievous rebel who gleefully proclaimed in the opening book of *Les Contemplations*, 'Je fis souffler un vent révolutionnaire, / Je mis un bonnet rouge au vieux dictionnaire' ('I gave breath to a revolutionary wind / I put a Phrygian cap on the old dictionary'; 1985b, II: 265). This poster of a beach-bound bard strikingly evoked its subject's melange of the prototypical and the irregular.

Hugo's simultaneous compliance and incompatibility with the patriarchal functions so heavily associated with his reputation resulted in what Sartre called a 'homme étonnant' who was 'moitié prêtre et moitié anar' ('half priest and half anarchist'; 1971-72, III: 383).

Baudelaire's feelings about Hugo indicate a similarly restless picture, given both his suspicion, if not condescension, towards Hugo's work in his private correspondence and his description of the poet as 'un génie sans frontières' ('a boundless genius'; 1976, II: 134-37). There can be no denying that posterity was at the forefront of Hugo's mind from an early age, or that such a desire has encouraged his categorization as a 'great' writer: 'Si l'écrivain n'écrivait que pour son temps, je devrais briser et jeter ma plume', he wrote in 1869 ('If the writer writes only for his times, I should snap my quill and throw it away'; 1972, II: 524). But the very non-categorical way of thinking that Hugo cultivated as a Romantic – and that has been brought into clearer focus by recent generations of Hugo specialists – emphasizes that the robes of the mythical magus seen in André Gill's caricature 'Victor Hugo en mage' (1880) are not worn with total comfort.

In his essay 'Les Génies appartenant au peuple', written as part of the *Proses philosophiques des années 1860-65*, Hugo warns that the nemesis of genius is the inertia that comes with self-satisfaction: 'L'égoïsme est la rouille du moi' ('Egotism is the rust of the self'; 1985a: 590). Perhaps recalling the 'harmonie des contraires' at the heart of his Theory of the Grotesque, as famously laid out in the preface to *Cromwell* (1827), Hugo differentiates between 'l'état passif' of harmony as serenity and 'l'état actif' of harmony as interaction between different forces and elements (594). He does so in order to stress versatility and flux as the true nature of the world he sees, conditioning human freedom and revealing the boundless inventiveness of a mysterious divine. Hugo thus conceives of greatness not as the ascent of an unmoving mountain but as the navigation of a dynamic ocean. Throughout these essays he looks to a lineage of great writers, from Homer to Shakespeare, and vows to follow their examples by resisting fixity and embracing endless self-reinvention as what he came to call the *homme-océan*. It is their innovative spirits that must be called upon in moments of self-determination rather than dutiful imitation. His analysis is an unmistakeable act of self-

promotion: ‘To speak *of* genius is once again a bid to speak *as* a genius’, with Hugo eyeing up the revolutionary nineteenth century as his to personify (Jefferson 2015: 87). But the essay is at the same time a plea for a vision of greatness as both open and indeterminate – ‘La dilatation spirituelle est urgente, l’opulence se consolidant jusqu’à s’endurcir’ (‘Spiritual dilation is urgent, given that opulence is consolidating itself to the point of becoming unbreakable’; 592) – contrasting the visionary poet’s ever-expanding horizons and depths with the enclosed and self-centred mindset of materialism.

Chateaubriand, for his part, is hardly mentioned in either the *Proses philosophiques* or *William Shakespeare*, since by this stage of his career Hugo looked beyond his own times for benchmarks against which to measure his achievements,⁵ but his presence is discernible in these texts nevertheless. The spectre of Hugo’s hero, for whom childhood memories of the north Breton coastline fostered a fascination with the sea’s dramatic changeability (see Lehtonen 1969), can be intuited through his admirer’s interest in metaphors of fluidity and in oceanic imagery. At the time of composing these essays, Hugo remained in exile on Guernsey and tellingly found stimulation for his creativity in the same English Channel that loomed large in Chateaubriand’s youth. From his lookout atop Hauteville House in St Peter Port and during his daily exercises along the coast, Hugo was fully aware that Chateaubriand’s grave lay only 60 miles to the southeast on the tidal island Grand Bé off Saint-Malo.⁶ The ebb and flow of the sea that had shaped Chateaubriand’s relationship to time and emotion held irresistible sway over Hugo’s own imagination. Systematizing logic can never take firm hold and the poet’s knowledge can never allow itself to become complacent or self-assured: ‘La pensée est véhicule. Faire une révolution, ce n’est pas tout, il faut la propager, l’étendre, la répandre, la débiter, la détailler, la multiplier, la rendre volatile et respirable, s’époumoner dessus. Il est nécessaire qu’elle passe la frontière’ (‘Thought is a vehicle. Starting a revolution is not enough: you have to propagate it, stretch it out, spread it,

divide it out, multiply it, make it vibrant and breathable, and make yourself hoarse with it. It's necessary for it to cross the line'; 1985a: 595). The cascading form of Hugo's prose here, coupled with the imagery of expansion and respiration, invokes an organic rather than objective order of thinking. If the poet is to converse with future generations, then it is certainly not enough simply to embody a commanding voice: he must transcend limitations and empower his work with fluctuation and flow rather than let it settle in place.

Such is the undertaking that Hugo has in mind when he wrote that 'Le grand dans les arts ne s'obtient qu'au prix d'une certaine aventure' ('Greatness in art is only obtained at the price of a certain adventure'; 1985a: 707). In this context, the art of being a *grandfather* that he describes in verse form in 1877 becomes more refined. At a time in his life when Hugo was a living legend, and only a few years before the avenue d'Elyau he would call home was renamed in his honour, Hugo self-consciously plays with his image as a grand old man of the French Republic. At the beginning of the decade, Hugo had ensured that no one would mistake his triumphant return to Paris after nearly twenty years in exile as a sign that he was about to rest at ease. His offer of amnesty to the Communards in 1871, followed by the publication of both *L'Année terrible* in 1872 and *Quatrevingt-treize* in 1874, confirmed that his rebellious streak had not softened with old age as he obliged his country to confront the most painful wounds in its recent and longer-term memory. His choices were all the more controversial in these early years of the Third Republic when the divisive legacy of the Revolution remained a major threat to France's stability. What then emerges from *L'Art d'être grand-père* is a picture more in keeping with that image of a playful Hugo alongside his grandchildren Georges and Jeanne than with any Godlike iconography: that of the arch-Romantic just as keen to throw security and responsibility to the wind as he is to shore up such forthright principles. 'Ah! ne m'élève pas au grade de bon Dieu!' [Ah! Do not propel me to the level of a worthy God!] he exclaims close to the very heart of this collection in the

sixth book (1985b, III: 772). In an unambiguous attempt to distance himself from the ideological connotations of that position and to wrestle himself free from any specific affiliation, be it religious or political, he insists that: ‘Toujours mon cœur, qui n’a ni bible ni koran, / Dédaigna le sophiste et brava le tyran’ (‘My heart, which knows no bible or koran, forever derides the sophist and opposes the tyrant’; III, 765). His poems identify far more strongly with the imaginative and impulsive behaviour of his grandchildren than with any sedate patriarch, thereby openly defying the expectations of the Third Republic and the cultural politics of French nationalism.

In these ways, Hugo’s ambition to ‘be’ Chateaubriand or nothing implies an absolutist reason that would be progressively complicated throughout his career. The choice is not between grandeur and oblivion, all or nothing: it is between engaging with the interrelationship of this and that, here and there, and denying that indeterminism. Consequently, any image of Hugo that would present a unified figure as opposed to a multiple identity is misunderstanding his will towards dynamism. Fitting him into a neat display case as a historical artefact and national treasure risks silencing his often disruptive voice: ‘parce que la littérature, infinie, ne saurait se limiter à ce qui est correct sans se mutiler, Hugo continue de heurter par son manque de mesure, de sobriété, de tact’ (‘because literature, as an infinite force, could never limit itself to what is correct without becoming mutilated, Hugo continues to strike us with his lack of measure, of sobriety, of tact’; Millet 2003: 6-7). His celebrated preface to *Les Misérables* is but one example. This single sentence is often cited as an illustration of Hugo’s thirst for continuing relevance with its emphatic use of anaphora to reiterate the conditions of the novel’s existence: ‘tant qu’il y aura sur la terre ignorance et misère, des livres de la nature de celui-ci pourront ne pas être inutiles’ (‘as long as there is ignorance and misery in this world, books of this kind cannot be useless’; 1985d, II: 2). And yet the preface may also be read as a yearning for irrelevance and for a day when

books of this kind are no longer *utile*; when they have achieved their purpose and negated their own *raison d'être* (the somewhat awkward use of a double negative at the end of this preface further muddies the waters). The preponderance of suicides in Hugo's novels and plays enhances the sense that, for all his ambitions, Hugo is equally as fascinated by moments of self-effacement and even self-destruction.

It is through this critical lens – one that is cinematographic rather than photographic – that Hugo should be approached in the twenty-first century. His enduring appeal relies as much on his unruliness as his steadfastness. In light of how his work continues to make its presence felt in political and cultural contexts alike, it remains important to probe and interrogate the ways in which he both embodies the nineteenth century and steps into our own times. The immense success story of *Les Misérables* (1862) is a central example, of course: it has inspired political figures from Hugo Chávez to Aung San Suu Kyi; it was cited by both Sarkozy and Jean-Luc Mélenchon in their 2012 French presidential campaigns; and it has prompted moral consciences worldwide as one of western literature's most adapted tales, from the world's longest-running stage musical to Mexican telenovelas and Japanese manga.⁷ Hugo's influence cannot, however, be framed within one single sphere of his career, even one as epic as *Les Misérables*. In the so-called 'age of the 99%', at a time when Amnesty International is calling for the decriminalization of the sex trade and the Eurozone crisis dominates the continent's identity, Hugo's broader interventions on poverty, social justice, and European federalism have not lost their significance. His positions decidedly do not yield unqualified or unequivocal answers, as reflected in his views on colonialism, which supported the *mission civilisatrice* and yet were disquieted by its violence (see Laurent 2001). The discomforts and tensions of such lines of thinking should not be downplayed, for they reveal the dauntless conscience that Hugo sees as vital to any truly democratic individual – the 'tempête sous un crâne', to recall his term for Jean Valjean's moral crisis.

In the past several years alone, adaptations and performances of Hugo's other literary works have ensured that the swirling thoughts inherent to his humanitarianism are maintained through art's ability to dramatize. His novel *L'Homme qui rit* (1869) was adapted for the screen in 2012 by Jean-Pierre Améris in a lavish Gothic fantasy starring Gérard Depardieu as Ursus, as well as in print for both Jean-David Morvan's and Nicolas Delestret's four-volume *bande dessinée* (2007-11) and Mark Stafford's and David Hine's graphic novel (2013), while Warner Bros Studios have been seeking to develop a new film version of *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) since 2011. On stage, Nicolas Lorneau's minimalist vision of *Hernani* premiered at Montpellier's 'Printemps des Comédiens' 2012 festival before two subsequent runs with the Comédie-Française at Paris's Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier in early 2013 and the summer of 2014. That summer, the Comédie-Française also staged Denis Podalydès's take on *Lucrèce Borgia* (1833) for the first time, with costumes by Christian Lacroix and the actor Guillaume Gallienne controversially playing the title role. The production returned the following year, when Cristiana Reali's staging of *Marie Tudor* was coming to the end of its five-month run at the Pépinière theatre in the capital, and played again in early 2016 for a three-month booking. Readings of Hugo's poetry, often accompanied by inventive videos, continue to appear on YouTube, and twenty of his poems – including the ubiquitous 'Demain, dès l'aube...' – have been adapted into *bande dessinée* form (Petit 2011). During the same period, interest in Hugo's personal life as the source of these multimedia dramas has not abated. Beyond the many biographies available on the market, English-language novels by Helen Humphreys (2011) and M. J. Rose (2013) retold the stories of Adèle Hugo's affair with Sainte-Beuve in the early 1830s and her husband's séances during exile respectively, and a *bande dessinée* also re-imagined Hugo as a detective of sorts during those same years of exile as he investigates his daughter Léopoldine's death (Gil and Paturaud, 2013).

The diversity of these retellings represents an indispensable part of Hugo's vibrant legacy. As he proposed in his eulogy to Balzac on 21 August 1850, 'Les grands hommes font leur propre piédestal; l'avenir se charge de la statue' (1985c: 327). It follows that that the field of Hugo studies itself forms another integral element to Hugo's indelible influence. Having experienced a steady growth since the 1950s,⁸ academic research and interest in Hugo is as fertile as ever thanks to a rich array of activities through the Paris-based Groupe Hugo, the Société des Amis de Victor Hugo, and various subject associations. Ultimately, no single volume could hope to cover this whole field, let alone chart the entire ocean of Hugo's work, especially given its ongoing appropriation and adaptation. The arguments in this special issue of *Dix-Neuf* are, however, intended to showcase the discussions that are opening up at the forefront of contemporary Hugo scholarship. Key forms and concepts are covered across the full range of Hugo's literary output, from poetry to politics, from theatre to oratory, and from fiction to history, so as to promote and sustain discussion along and beyond the lines sketched in this opening essay. There are inevitably some absences, such as Hugo's graphic work, although his visual imagination is clear to see in a number of the contributions that follow. As ever with Hugo, the part gives access to the whole.

David Bellos begins by gauging the acoustics of Hugo's most famous novel and 'sounding out' *Les Misérables*. Bellos draws attention to the significance of sound (or the lack thereof) in speech in order to listen yet more attentively to how language functions in Hugo's fiction. Dialogue of a different kind is the subject of Fiona Cox's essay. She returns to Hugo's relationship with Shakespeare as a formative aspect of his poetic self-identification during exile and casts new light on one of literature's most titanic (and yet strangely under-explored) pairings. Jean-Marc Hovasse then brings another of Hugo's cited influences into

the frame and examines in greater detail Hugo's debt to Chateaubriand. Given the 1816-2016 anniversary, the 'modèle Chateaubriand' warrants yet closer scrutiny in terms of how Hugo both imitates and reworks his childhood favourite. Katherine Lunn-Rockliffe tracks the sinuous verses of Hugo's cosmic poetry to demonstrate the indeterminate and ever-creative vision of the divine as the poet sees it. She argues that Hugo's noted interest in movement cannot be fully understood without acknowledging how image and metaphor enact the very dynamism that they describe. Claude Millet shifts the focus from the wider cosmos to the narrative of history in her essay and specifically to confrontations with crisis and oblivion. Coming to the first iteration of *La Légende des siècles* (1859) as a test case for probing Hugo's oeuvre, she draws out the tensions between Hugo's historical consciousness and spiritual beliefs.

From spiritual strain to the tensions of form in Hugo's famous 'mélange des genres', Florence Naugrette offers a corrective to any simplistic understanding of genre in Hugo's plays (and by extension the full spectrum of his writing). Situating Hugolian theatre within the broader context of Romantic drama, she reminds us that type and identity do not so much explode as disperse in Hugo's hands. Jeanna Ni Riordáin takes to task another of the stereotypes that relate to Hugo in her essay. By retrieving the feminine voice of Hugo's exile oratory that can so easily be silenced by the cliché of the *grand homme*, she underlines the importance of women's subjectivity to Hugo's thinking. Discussion then turns to heroism in Laurence Porter's essay and the significance of the Spanish *pícaro* to Hugo's use of character. Porter invites us to read *Les Misérables* through the picaresque as a means of better comprehending Hugo's ideas about agency and posterity. In the final essay, Timother Raser delves into the shadows of Hugo's poetry. Raser confronts the *rien* on the other side of Hugo's ambition to become Chateaubriand as a necessary realm for the poet in which he can experience alterity and exercise his restless mind. The range of these nine contributions gives

a clear sense of how Hugo engaged with a world he believed to be boundless. Above all, they insist that, while Hugo may be unapologetic in his desire for posterity, it would be a mistake to reduce that spirit to the triviality of cliché. Picturing the whole requires a more Hugolian approach.

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¹ Hugo reiterated his admiration of Chateaubriand in his early career. For a useful account of how Hugo paid homage to him during this period, including his ode to 'Monsieur de Chateaubriand' in June 1824, see Hovasse 2001, especially chapter 4 ('Un jeune homme de lettres').

² The good majority of such souvenirs indeed used Hugo's likeness from his more senior years: 'L'essentiel des objets, publications, publicités, affiches, reproduisent donc le visage de Hugo à partir des portraits photographiques d'Étienne Carjat (1873 et 1878), Nadar (1878 et 1885) et du portrait peint par Léon Bonnat en 1878' (Gille 2011: 6). Nadar's 1884 image (as opposed to his 1885 picture of Hugo on his deathbed) must surely be added to this list. See also: Georgel 1985 (140-45); and Garval 2004, especially pp. 197-206, where he covers 'everything from lapel pins to dinner plates, inkwells to pocketwatches [...] liquor bottles to andirons' (202).

³ The allusion to Barnum here is one that was picked up in a different context immediately after the publication of *Les Misérables*: the novel was the subject of a massive publicity campaign across numerous international cities in the spring of 1862, hence one reviewer likened the event to the work of 'a book-selling Barnum' who had orchestrated a breathtaking show 'which exceed[ed] everything known in the whole history of literature' (Whipple 1862).

⁴ This second title truncates the full phrase ('Et s'il n'en reste qu'un, je serai celui-là!'), which is curious given the overall power of the expression as a commitment on Hugo's part to opposing Napoleon III's regime to the very end. Gallo may however have wanted to avoid confusion between his volume and Sophie Grossiord's earlier critical biography (1998), the title of which itself edited Hugo's statement: the ellipsis at the close of 'Et s'il n'en reste qu'un...' invites readers to complete the saying and implies the kind of familiarity with Hugo that is so significant to France's cultural history.

⁵ References to Chateaubriand in the *Proses philosophiques* are few and far between: in ‘Le Goût’ Hugo dismisses Stendhal’s critique of the writer (1985a: 571), and in ‘Les Traducteurs’ he notes Chateaubriand’s rare ability to read and understand Milton (623; 631). In *William Shakespeare*, there is only a passing reference to Chateaubriand: in ‘Le Beau serviteur du vrai’, his name appears alongside other nineteenth-century writers who Hugo identifies as harnessing poetic energy, including Byron, Lamartine, and Sand, and who round off a long list of names from antiquity onwards (1985a: 409-10).

Hugo’s drive to identify himself with the nineteenth century helps in part to explain Chateaubriand’s relative absence here, and especially his omission from the ‘dynasty’ of geniuses that Hugo lists in *William Shakespeare* (283): as Ann Jefferson has argued, the era of the French Revolution necessarily remains unrepresented following Shakespeare, leaving a purposely ‘empty’ space in history ‘which Hugo is making a bid to fill’ (2015: 85).

⁶ In the essays that compose *L’Archipel de la Manche* at the start of his novel *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (1866), Hugo reflects on the sanctuary that the Channel Islands have historically provided and recalls that Chateaubriand himself passed through during his own exile following the French Revolution: ‘Chateaubriand, jeune, pauvre, obscur, sans patrie, s’est assis sur une pierre du vieux quai de Guernesey’ (1985d, III: 33).

⁷ See Grossman and Stephens, 2015 (especially the introduction and second part) for a sustained discussion of the novel’s adaptation and cultural influence.

⁸ For a succinct overview of Hugo studies and its central critical developments, see Stephens 2009, especially pp. 67-71.